



## SO, WHAT'S A MUNICIPAL DRAIN?

S. Vander Veen

Perhaps you've just purchased property, and been told by your municipality that you are assessed into a municipal drain. Perhaps you have owned a property for a couple of years and have recently discovered that you are located in the watershed of a municipal drain. You're probably wondering, what does this mean? How does it affect me? What will it cost?

### PHYSICALLY, WHAT IS A MUNICIPAL DRAIN?

Physically, a municipal drain is simply a drainage system. Most municipal drains are either ditches or closed systems such as pipes or tiles buried in the ground. They can also include structures such as dykes or berms, pumping stations, buffer strips, grassed waterways, storm water detention ponds, culverts and bridges. Even some creeks and small rivers are now considered to be municipal drains. Municipal drains are primarily located in rural agricultural areas of the province.

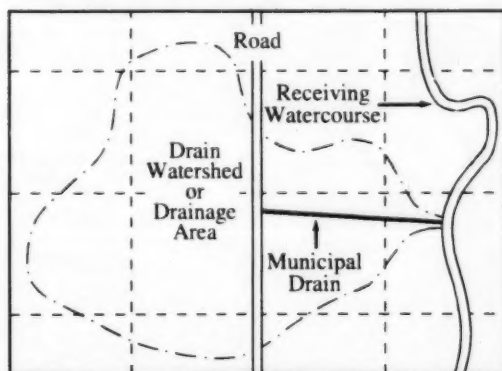


FIGURE 1. Plan of a Municipal Drain

### THE PURPOSE OF MUNICIPAL DRAINS

Municipal drains have been a fixture of rural Ontario's infrastructure since the 1800's. Most municipal drains were constructed to improve the drainage of agricultural land by serving as the discharge point for private agricultural tile drainage systems. However, they also remove excess water collected by roadside ditches, residential lots, churches, schools, industrial lands, commercial lands and any other properties in rural areas. They are a vital component of the local infrastructure.

Without them, many areas of the province would be subjected to regular flooding, reduced production from agricultural land and increased public health risks.

### WHY IS IT CALLED A "MUNICIPAL DRAIN"?

There are many, many drainage ditches and buried pipes in the province, but not all of them are "municipal drains". So what distinguishes a municipal drain?

Municipal drains are created under the authority of the *Drainage Act*. There are 3 key elements of a municipal drain:

**1) Community project** — Landowners who need to solve a drainage problem may submit a prescribed petition under the *Drainage Act* to their local municipality, requesting the establishment of a municipal drain. If certain criteria are met, the municipality appoints an engineer who prepares a report, identifying the proposed solution to the problem and how the costs will be shared. There are various meetings where landowners in the watershed of the municipal drain can voice their desires and concerns. There are also several appeal stages where they can voice their objections. So, the end result of the process is a "communally accepted" project.

**2) Legal Existence** — After all appeals have been heard and dealt with, the municipality passes a by-law, adopting the engineer's report. The municipality then has the authority and the responsibility to construct the project. The cost of the work is assessed to the lands in the watershed in the same ratios as contained within the engineer's report. So for a ditch or a pipe to be a municipal drain, there must be a by-law adopting an engineer's report.

**3) Municipal Infrastructure** — Once a municipal drain has been constructed under the authority of a by-law, it becomes part of that municipality's infrastructure. The local municipality, through its drainage superintendent, is responsible for repairing and maintaining the municipal drain. In certain circumstances, the municipality can be held liable for damages for not maintaining these drains.

## DO'S AND DON'TS FOR PROPERTY OWNERS

### You should:

- Find out the name of your local municipality's drainage superintendent.
- If you don't have any information on the municipal drains that affect your property, make arrangements with your municipality to get copies. Please note you may have to pay for the photocopies.
- Find out how the municipal drain affects your property. How much is your property assessed? Are there any buried municipal drains that cross beneath your land? Is there a municipal working space along or above a municipal drain on your property?
- Remove debris from any catchbasins that may be located on your property or the adjoining road. This type of ongoing preventative work can reduce the possibility of property damage during storm events.
- As an involved landowner, you have a responsibility for the drains located on your property, so observe them. If you notice any problems, immediately notify the drainage superintendent or the local municipality.
- Before purchasing a property, investigate how municipal drains may affect the property.

### You can expect:

- Municipalities must maintain their municipal drains. Therefore, if you have a municipal drain located on your property, you can expect that your municipality will periodically arrange to enter onto your property and perform the necessary work. After it is completed, you will be billed for your share of the cost.
- For a period of time while the work is being completed, you can expect the working space along the drain to be accessed by the maintenance equipment and the land to be disrupted to some degree. Because this working space is a form of an easement, you will not be paid for any damages that occur on this land.
- Municipalities have the right to accumulate the cost of maintaining a drain for up to five years or \$5,000. Therefore, it is possible that you may be billed for work that occurred before you owned a property.

### You should NOT:

- Along every municipal drain is an unregistered working space that the municipality has the right to use to maintain or repair the drain. Keep this working space accessible and do not plant trees or build structures in this area. If you do, and it results in an obstruction to the maintenance equipment, you may have to pay the cost of removing that obstruction.
- Don't store materials such as brush, lumber or other floatable material near the drain, because during storm events, it could float away and block the drain.

- The local municipality is responsible for maintaining municipal drains on behalf of the community of landowners involved in a drain. If you want to install a culvert or bridge on an open ditch municipal drain, or if a municipal drain requires maintenance, don't perform the work yourself; instead notify your municipality. If you do unauthorized work on a drain and that work results in damages to the drain or to other landowners, you could be responsible for paying the cost of repairing the damages.
- Although they are "man-made", all municipal drains eventually connect with the many beautiful lakes, rivers and streams located Ontario. Do not direct septic system waste, milkhouse wastes, barnyard and manure storage runoff or other pollutants directly to these drains.

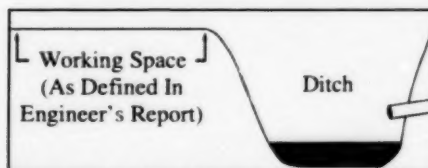


**FIGURE 2. Cross-Section of an Open Ditch Municipal Drain**

### NEED MORE INFORMATION?

The following Factsheets provide additional information about municipal drains and the *Drainage Act* and are available from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs:

- Drainage Legislation, 89-166
- Understanding Drainage Assessment, 92-035
- Drainage Act Appeals, 86-014
- Duties of the Landowner Under the Drainage Act, 99-051
- Mutual Agreement Drains, 86-064
- Municipal Drains and the Landowner, Publication 55
- Common Law Aspects of Water, 74-058
- Top 10 Common Law Drainage Problems Between Rural Neighbours, 98-015

These Factsheets are also available on the Web site:  
[www.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/engineer/stew/quality.htm](http://www.gov.on.ca/OMAFRA/english/engineer/stew/quality.htm)

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ISSN 1198-712X

Également disponible en français  
 (commande n° 01-060)



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